

ONLY HUMAN

The Powers That Is

By SIDNEY FIELDS

Ten years after U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down while flying over Russia, he's still asking himself if the flight was betrayed.

As clues to possible treachery that downed him and aborted a planned summit meeting between President Eisenhower and Khrushchev, Powers offers three seemingly unrelated incidents:

Approval orders for the flights came from the President's office to the U-2 base in Turkey by radio code. The night before, Powers' flight communications broke down and approval was later



Francis Gary Powers—Was there treachery?

received over an open telephone line, which was absolutely forbidden in any circumstances.

"It's possible that the Russians knew I was taking off even before I did," said Powers, on a visit here from his home in California. He's 40, stocky, pleasant, speaks softly.

Secondly, in 1958, two "concerned civil servants," William H. Martin and Bernon Ferguson, called on Rep. Wayne Hays (D. Ohio) to protest the U-2 flights. When they defected, it was revealed that they had been feeding secret information to the Russians. At the time Powers was scheduled to make his flight, they were still working as cryptologists for the National Security Agency, which processed and studied data of U-2 missions.

Startling Clue

The third clue is startling and tantalizing. In 1957, the U-2s were based in Atsugi, Japan, where a 17-year-old Marine Corps radar operator had the job of scouting incoming foreign airplanes. He had access to height-finding radar. In 1958, he was transferred to El Toro, Calif., where he had access to radio codes and advanced height-finding radar.

A month after he obtained a hardship discharge in Sept., 1959, he defected to Russia and informed a U.S. embassy official that he was renouncing his citizenship, that he had offered the Russians all he knew of the Marine Corps and radar and hinted he knew something of "special interest."

"His name was Lee Harvey Oswald," said

Powers. "The Warren Commission Document numbered 931 is secret and withheld from research and its title is: 'Oswald's Access to Information About the U-2.'"

There are a whole series of such intriguing revelations in "Operation Overflight," the book Powers wrote with Curt Gentry to be published on Friday, the 10th anniversary of his trip over Russia. It took six years to get CIA permission to write it.

Powers emerges from it as a starveling of fate who stumbled on to a page of history. Always a "nice guy," always "polite," the son of a shoe repair man from Appalachia, he enlisted in the Air Force as a private after graduation from Milligan College, went to flying school, won his wings and in 1956 was recruited into the CIA.

U-2s Still Flying

By April, 1960, he had 600 hours in U-2s, such a tricky plane that pilots stall it to land it. It collects upper air samples to determine results of Soviet nuclear tests and makes amazingly accurate photos of a lot of real estate from high altitudes. When Powers was hit, he was 15 miles up.

"But that's not maximum altitude," he said. "I can't tell you what is maximum. A lot of people I know are still flying them."

He remembers vividly what went through his mind when he was hit and began parachuting down over Russia.

"There was a destruct device in the plane and I couldn't get at it. I had a needle dipped in curare and one scratch from it would kill me in 70 seconds. I didn't use it. I was sure the Russians would shoot me."

After 61 days of interrogation, he was afraid they'd take him to the scheduled summit meeting and Khrushchev would present him to Eisenhower with: "Here's something you dropped over Russia." He was sentenced to 10 years, served 22 months and was exchanged for Russian spy Rudolf Abel.

He worked briefly for the CIA and then for the next seven years was a U-2 test pilot for Lockheed, but was released in a big cutback two months ago. While with Lockheed, he was not allowed anywhere near the new high-flying SR-71.

"Maybe I was considered unreliable," he said with some bitterness.

'Hero or Bum?'

At the time of his capture, he was called "more a mercenary than a patriot" and "a tower of jelly." One senator promised that Powers would never fly for the government again and a Texas paper asked: "Hero or Bum?"

"I'm certainly not a hero but my children weren't going to be asked if I were a bum," Powers said.

His son, Gary is 5. Dee, 13, is his wife's child from a previous marriage. He adopted Dee. Powers was married once before, too.

In 1964, he met Allen W. Dulles, then CIA chief at a dinner. Dulles interrupted a prepared speech to say: "Francis Gary Powers, who has been criticized, I believe unjustly, deserves well of his country. He performed his duty on a very dangerous mission and he performed it well and I think I know more about that than some of his detractors and critics."

"But why," Powers asked, "why didn't he say that 10 years ago or even when I returned from Russia?"